

COMMENTARY

ENGLAND: THE CITIZEN ON TRIAL

"Decency is Not Enough"

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LONDON

"... The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity. ..." (W. B. Yeats, "The Second Coming").

IT IS becoming a truism that for Britain much more than the Labor government's fate is at stake in the present struggle to deal with the country's economic problems. Success or failure, it is now frequently being said, will determine the survival or destruction of liberal-democratic institutions in Britain. As Sir Stafford Cripps phrased it in the House of Commons, October 23, 1947,

AGAINST a background of deepening economic crisis and international conflict, the British Labor government doggedly hammers out its socialist program. As the government's program develops—and with it signs of social unrest—the British citizenry is called upon to endure new sacrifices and new challenges. Here, GEORGE LICHTHEIM discusses these problems emphasizing recent anti-Semitic disturbances which, as one of the signs of Britain's distress, raise important questions as to what can and must be expected of the population in a liberal-democratic country. Mr. Lichtheim is London correspondent for two Palestinian dailies, the English-language *Palestine Post*, and the Hebrew *Davar*, and a regular contributor to the *London Tribune*. Mr. Lichtheim lived in Palestine from 1934 to 1945.

"If our economy . . . should collapse, our democracy will in all probability collapse too, and will disappear, and with it will go the last stronghold of Western democratic civilization in Europe."

The ready assent to these judgments by members of all parties—the main difference being that Conservatives and Liberals question the Labor government's ability to prevent the threatened collapse—is itself indicative of the sharpness with which the destruction of the old equilibrium in economic affairs, and the effort to establish a new equilibrium on a different plane, has posed the question of social stability. At the same time it reflects the degree to which a somewhat simplified notion of economic determinism has become common ground. Statements such as that quoted above fit into the typical *Weltanschauung* of modern British politicians and historians, according to whom the Weimar Republic was destroyed by its failure to deal effectively with mass unemployment in a period of acute business depression. Though this particular liberal-democratic weakness of mass unemployment in the face of economic instability is not a present threat in Britain, it does not follow that no threat exists.

Notwithstanding the new economic deter-

ministic emphasis, a good deal of the old "idealist" dualism also survives in the British public mind. Cripps himself gave an example of this when in the same speech he said: "There is not one of us who is not acutely aware today of the high hopes and splendid ideals that inspired so many of our own people to make the supreme sacrifice in these wars. It is for us to carry on those torches of democracy. . . . We can bring them to the door of the temple of their hopes if only we will live with the same spirit of devotion to our country. . . . I wish that today our country could refresh its heart and mind with a deep draught of . . . Christian faith. . . ." It will be seen from these quotations that socialists are not immune to the intellectual fashion which in our society inclines people to assume that—to quote John Dewey (COMMENTARY, October 1947)—"discussion is moral in the degree in which it consists of complaints about what exists and exhortations about what *should*, or 'ought' to, exist." It need only be added that Cripps received an ovation from all parts of the House when he had concluded his peroration. On the other hand, his speech produced no noticeable effect on the coal production figures, which remained obstinately low.

THE whole incident may be read as another demonstration in the continuing debate on the real or pretended virtues of the average citizen in a liberal society, a debate whose flagging impetus has been revived by the partial collapse of the market economy. Under strict *laissez-faire* rules, the citizen, as Dr. Hayek has pointed out, is under no moral compulsion to perform services greater than those which enlightened self-interest demands. Obligation therefore becomes a matter of complying with a set of rules having something of the force and the anonymity of physical "law." This fact automatically relieves the state of the task to which the British Labor government is proving so unequal: that of making people do more work than is strictly necessary from their individual point of view. Under a regime of industrial full employment and cradle-

to-grave social security, exhortation suddenly assumes a *social* importance. But of course exhortation is not enough, especially in a period of universal consumer goods shortages when it may be difficult to supplement exhortation by holding a large enough carrot in front of the donkey.

To the historian, if he is also a socialist, this may be no more than a problem of managing the transition from the old society to the new, with a new appropriate scale of values, including quasi-universal recognition of the citizen's obligation to do his or her best for the general good of society. It must be recognized, however, that for the politician or the labor leader who has to manage the transition it is rapidly becoming the most burning of all issues. He cannot, like Hitler (and other totalitarians), crack the whip too hard, for fear of being denounced, and probably overthrown, as an enemy of liberty. On the other hand, he dare not trust to the effect of exhortation alone, and he may find it difficult, for vulgar utilitarian reasons or possibly because of trade union resistance, to introduce a graded scale of economic rewards, that reserve the biggest carrots for those performing the most vital tasks, e.g. farming or mining.

Placed between impossible alternatives, he is apt to fall back on a mixture of threats and blandishments, inevitably giving the impression that he feels less certain at heart about the ubiquity of actual or potential good citizenship than he would like to believe and to make others believe.

Nevertheless, short of the extreme case of those who despair of democratic institutions and seek for a solution in one or the other form of totalitarianism, he remains wedded to the assumption that most, if not all, people are fundamentally responsive to the demands of good citizenship. If he is British, he is likely also to feel that decency, tolerance, and good humor are the prerequisites of civilized life, and that fortunately these qualities are still to be found in abundance in Great Britain, whatever the unhappy state of other European or overseas countries.

IT MAY seem both far-fetched and captious to contrast this relatively optimistic appraisal with the recent evidence concerning the growth of fascist and anti-Semitic tendencies in Britain. Neither the revival of Mosley's organization nor the rowdy anti-Jewish meetings in London's East End are, after all, comparable in significance with such symptoms of social disintegration as the spread of black marketeering or the obstinate failure of output to keep pace with social demand—not only in coal, but throughout a whole range of relatively unattractive basic industries and occupations—despite all governmental efforts to stimulate production.* Nevertheless the matter is of importance, to Britain as much as to the Jewish community, because of the insight it affords into some of the less obvious implications of the national cult of "decency" as the foundation of good citizenship.

To begin with the facts. The growth of anti-Semitic and fascist tendencies is a matter of common observation. In some respects it dates back to the emergence of Hitler and the resultant spread of "Jew-consciousness" throughout the population. In its more recent and more virulent form it seems to reflect a compound of social influences ranging from the fall in middle-class living standards and the loss of control over certain imperial dependencies to the advent of the Labor government and the undue prominence given to Jewish-Gentile antagonism by the conflict in and around Palestine. How seriously the latter is affecting the climate of opinion in important sections of the governing class as well as the lower strata is evident from an article in the *Economist* (October 18, 1947)

* Little notice has been taken of a recent remark addressed by Mr. Aneurin Bevan to his fellow-countrymen (and former fellow-miners) in South Wales: the men of his generation, he is reported to have said, would have done more to keep a Labor government in office. Mr. Bevan is still under fifty. When he said that "the miner of today is not the kind of man with whom I worked in the pits," he was passing judgment on a generation which exchanged the South Wales miner's characteristic mixture of evangelical Christianity and "belief" in socialism—for what? Very likely for the standards of Hollywood.

which bluntly accused Whitehall officialdom of pandering to anti-Semitism. That a large—if not the largest—section of the popular press has been doing the same for years is also common knowledge. In this respect Palestine has channeled and catalyzed public sentiment rather than created it, though a special edge was given to it by the terrorist murders. Their chief effect in this connection perhaps has been to render anti-Semitism socially acceptable in circles hitherto closed to any overt expression of such sentiments. (This was the burden of the argument in the *Economist* article already mentioned, which on this ground advised the government to dissociate itself from the whole Palestine complex as being likely to inflame popular feeling in Britain—since the war "the residuary legatee of the maleficent heritage of European anti-Semitism.")

AGAIN, those present at the recent Conservative party conference (Brighton, October 1 to 4) were made uncomfortably aware of the extent to which this party, despite the restraining influence of its upper-class leadership, has become susceptible to aggressive, chauvinistic, and barely veiled anti-Semitic tendencies. These well up from the strata of society most conscious of the extent to which their own and Britain's position in the world has been threatened by the pressure of social and economic forces vaguely identified with America ("Jewish Bankers") on the one hand and the Soviet Union ("Jewish Communists") on the other.

Finally, there is the visible demonstration afforded weekly to those who make the Sunday morning pilgrimage to London's East End in order to watch dense crowds listening without apparent disapproval to harangues of a type with which visitors to Germany became familiar in the years preceding the collapse of liberal democracy in that country. That the police have been alleged to view these meetings with greater tolerance than the attempts of Jewish or Communist hecklers to break them up is probably less important than the success of fascist speakers in attracting considerable audiences, and

the evidence that Jew-baiting and red-baiting are eagerly listened to: the two go together in view of the speakers' characteristic attempt to portray Communism as "Jewish" (and Palestinian terrorism as "Moscow-inspired"—a reading of events also favored by certain Catholic publications of unimpeachable respectability).

These meetings are frequently noisy and sometimes violent; their real significance would nevertheless seem to lie in the effect they are having on a proportion of those "quiet citizens" who are normally apostrophized by the editorial writers and the respectable politicians as the ultimate judges of social issues. That some Jews who live in the area have been driven frantic by evidence of virulent Jew-hatred, and that others are reacting by joining the Communists, is noteworthy but hardly important; what matters is that most of their Gentile neighbours are showing little emotion about the whole matter. The most that can be said is that a number of them object to having their Sunday quiet disturbed by loudspeakers blaring out rival speeches at nearby street corners.

IT IS against this unpromising background that so distinguished a writer as Rebecca West has recently come forward with a series of articles in the *Evening Standard* analyzing the spread of popular anti-Semitism and advising the decent citizen to join in wholehearted but quiet and respectable condemnation of this disease of the mind. The net effect of these articles is to make one realize that decency, to paraphrase the words of another Englishwoman, is not enough.

The burden of Miss West's grievance against the fascists (and the anti-fascists) is that they make the enjoyment of the English Sunday impossible for the quiet householder and his family, by their strident demonstrations, and in particular by their use of loudspeakers. The citizen, who thus finds himself elevated to the moral judgment seat, is by implication defined as a person who seeks nothing but his livelihood, his harmless private enjoyments, his privacy, and his rest. That he may also be concerned in some man-

ner with the public good is not apparent from the demand that he shall be left in peace instead of being subjected to the infernal din set up by the fascist speakers, and by their "riotous" opponents. Among these opponents the Jews are scolded for trying to mob the fascists whenever they see a chance, and the Communists for disguising their real purpose behind a cynical show of concern for democracy and Jewish rights. From there it is not a great step to "a plague on both their houses," and the step is in fact taken so far as the Communists are concerned, while the Jews are advised to concentrate on quiet propaganda among their more reasonable and respectable Gentile neighbours. Finally, the authorities are urged to ban the use of loudspeakers as an invasion of the privacy of the home. That, more or less, is what the advice given by Rebecca West to her fellow citizens in the year 1947 amounts to. The remainder of her series of articles is concerned with refutation of the usual anti-Jewish libels current among the Gentile population and has no direct relevance to the problem of fascist disintegration in a liberal democracy.

Throughout, Miss West's analysis rests on the unproved and—in the present writer's view—groundless assumption that the average citizen only has to have the truth pointed out to him in order to become aware that it is the truth and to proceed to cold-shoulder the small minority of pathological anti-Semites, and the handful of fascist crooks and gangsters. Fascists who, openly or by implication, incite audiences to follow the Nazi example, and Jews who indulge in abusive and frequently stupid and ineffective heckling fall alike under Miss West's displeasure, and no doubt under the displeasure of the liberal-conservative upper class she represents.

As the (American) author of a letter of protest to the *New Statesman* (October 25) pungently remarked, the murderer and the corpse are equally blamed, in strict accordance with upper-class canons of taste, by which the good is equated with the genteel, the evil with the vulgar. Right and wrong

no longer exist. Neither, it appears, do Right and Left. The call goes out to all good citizens, of whatever class, sect, or creed, to become even better citizens by keeping their tempers and preserving their sense of fairness, and the responsibility is placed squarely where it does *not* belong: on the stresses felt by *all* groups in society because of the war and its consequences. "For," Miss West writes, "are not Jews showing a failure to realize the fears felt by Gentiles? The Gentiles also are overwrought, because they have also been subjected to an unprecedented strain. They suffered unemployment and apprehension in the world which Hitler and Mussolini were tearing to pieces during the 'thirties. . . . Now the war is over we have emerged all alike exhausted into a world which threatens us with increasing disorganization. . . . Can it be that the Jews really think the Gentiles feel secure? I believe they do hold that monstrous delusion. . . . *We have all been persecuted by the powers of darkness*, we are all of us afraid of the future, and those people who fear it most, because they have no gifts with which to fight for their lives, are huddling together into Fascist groups. . . ."

It is perhaps unnecessary to point out that the words "we have all been persecuted" reveal a remarkable failure to understand what the six million dead have meant for the Jewish consciousness in the modern world. One's suspicion that the sensibility which permits such writing is not adequate to its subject matter is borne out by close reading of these widely circulated articles, which try to formulate a "sane" attitude on the Jewish question, more or less on these lines: "If you dislike your Jewish neighbour, dislike him then, but keep quiet about it, and remember that your feeling for him is probably irrational and ill-grounded." It would be difficult to imagine anything less likely to stir the average citizen into a realization of what is really at stake. That is not to say that this type of enlightenment is not useful within strict limits. The trouble is that it is of little value in the area in which social conflict actually takes place today.

BRTAIN has emerged weakened and impoverished from a war conducted under Conservative leadership, in the course of which a Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer, by heavy taxes on the larger incomes, inaugurated the social revolution now being completed by the Labor government. This fact explains both the current dissatisfaction of the British middle class and its restlessness under a social and political regime which promises no early alleviation of the new economic burdens. Like the Labor government's attitude towards its working-class supporters, the Conservatives' attitude towards the middle class reflects the realization that greater sacrifices are demanded from all groups of society. As the *Economist* of October 18 put it with characteristic bluntness: ". . . what is happening is not the crisis of a single party or a single creed . . . but the crisis of a whole political and social system . . . the crisis of a whole nation which has to shake itself out of habits of sloth. . . ." This, and not the nationalization of the coal industry, is the really revolutionary change brought about by the history of the last five or six years. Since at the moment it is the middle classes who are feeling the pressure most keenly—the workers still being cushioned against the shock by full employment, relatively high wages, and extended social insurance benefits—it is not surprising that their temper has become markedly less tolerant and complacent than it was during the inter-war years.

The difficulty from the point of view of the political leaders lies in the fact that it is impossible simultaneously to apply a soporific and to call forth the unprecedented efforts demanded by the new situation. The attempt to do both, by alternately stressing the urgency of social renovation and the need for national unity, has already failed either to reconcile the middle class to the Labor government or to stimulate the productivity of the workers, and will continue to fail.

The government's notorious inability to dramatize the social changes it is carrying out, or is supposed to be carrying out, is due not to Mr. Attlee's personal talent for "de-

hydrating every issue except that of banknotes," to quote the sour quip of the *Economist*. It is due to something more fundamental: Fabian socialism is too genteel to strike the imagination of the workers, and not sufficiently tough to deal with the problem of planning under conditions of full employment. Its half-way house offers a comfortable abode for large numbers of well-meaning and civilized people, but it has failed to provide the driving power of which society has been to a large extent deprived by the paralysis of the market economy. Hence the resurgent cry for a return to liberalism, and simultaneously the growth of frankly authoritarian tendencies. (The Conservative party's "Industrial Charter" attempts to steer a middle course by presenting a vague sketch of something called "self-government in industry" which in practice would probably add up to a watered-down version of the corporate state.)

ALL this constitutes a dilemma for the type of political leader—still overwhelmingly predominant—who is wedded to democracy of the liberal type, whatever his party politics. At bottom it is felt by all who take an active share in public life that Britain requires a new social integration. Since it is not practical politics to say so out loud, there is a good deal of misplaced emphasis on so-called moral values, apostrophized by liberals in abstraction from their social function, and identified by Catholics and other Christian conservatives with the maintenance of traditional home and family life. At the same time, there is no concealing the fact that the social stability that permits such hortatory eloquence to be expended from the pulpit, the press, and the public platform, is gravely deficient by prewar standards, though greatly superior to its equivalent across the Channel and in Continental Europe generally.

The blunt fact is that Britain is entering upon the sort of crisis—economic, social, political, and "moral"—which typically precedes a violent attempt at reintegration on anti-liberal lines; which is not to say that Britain is "going fascist" or is in any immedi-

ate danger of doing so. Indeed, it is possible, perhaps probable, that other influences will assert themselves before it is too late; before, that is to say, the present disintegration has gone so far as to make the operation of liberal democracy impossible. There is, however, no guarantee that a substantial part of the lower middle class will not be drawn towards a "nationalized" form of fascism.

If this is happening, it is unlikely that enlightening propaganda of the type represented by the Rebecca West articles will have the smallest effect on any but those already immune to fascist influence. The reason is that the "decent citizen," a slightly idealized version of the *homo oeconomicus*, and, like the latter, one or two dimensions short of full reality, is not the bulwark of order his admirers take him for. At best he is the man who pays his taxes and gives no trouble; at worst he is liable to be stampeded by imaginary threats to his security. As a symbol of the new integration which Britain urgently requires he is utterly useless. Moreover, there is real ground for doubting whether his numbers are as large as his apologists are in the habit of assuming. It may well be that he is already in a minority.

WHAT is disturbing about the readiness of contemporary writers of Rebecca West's standing to lean upon this broken reed is the failure to perceive that the national cult of decency, fairness, and tolerance becomes meaningless if these desirable qualities are conceived as canons of behavior or moral abstractions divorced from the totality of a way of life which alone can sustain them in difficult times. Before the war, and indeed throughout the whole of the past century, they represented a whole corpus of social habits which differentiated life in Britain from the harsher reality of the Continent. Even today this remains true when they are measured against what the average man has come to know of Germany, and vaguely suspects of Eastern Europe.

The humanitarian upsurge is still strong: witness the new sensitiveness to matters of child education, the problems of the aged

and the sick, and the treatment of criminals. Nevertheless there is a tendency for this interest in the weaker members of society to be associated with an attitude which is not far removed from Munichism, that refuses to bear responsibility for those beyond the charmed circle of one's own culture, and an insistence upon the desirability of cultivating one's garden and ignoring the follies of the outside world. Conversely, those who still think of Britain in "imperial" terms are tempted to an aggressiveness of which their predecessors were normally free. It is through this gap between its imperial and its liberal traditions that the self-confidence of the British ruling class has partly leaked away.

Will this drain continue, and will it weaken the resistance of Britain to political maladies of the Continental type? The answer depends to some extent on the success of the intelligentsia in creating new models of social behavior. Britain is in the fortunate position of possessing both a governing class with liberal-democratic traditions of rule and a working class with ripe political experience. Compared with most Continental countries, its social cohesion is high: violence is still almost unknown and unscrupulousness is not widespread. Nevertheless there are danger signs.

No society can for long extol a mere negative—the absence of totalitarianism—as an ideal without suffering some diminution in moral and intellectual stature. Pre-war Bri-

tain was conscious (not always on sufficient grounds) of being a better place than any Continental country, and it was this conviction which really underpinned the national cult of tolerance and the stability of the "decent citizen." In order to become model citizens of the new world order, Britons will have to solve the pressing problems of their country, and nothing is of less use to them in this task than an abstract glorification of various secondary traits of the national character. Indeed, the new mood of national self-consciousness is probably having harmful effects all around.

If the Labor party had succeeded—alas, it has hardly tried—in presenting a new type of Briton to the world, cabinet ministers and editorial writers could have saved themselves their feeble bluster. No doubt a new élite is forming. The new type of British national who is not just a "decent citizen" in search of peace and quiet, but an active inhabitant of the modern socialized world, probably exists somewhere, but he is not being given a chance to remake his country in his image and to represent it worthily abroad. Least of all is his existence suspected by writers belonging to an upper class which is indeed "exhausted," not because it has been "persecuted," but because it has shot its bolt.

British Conservatives are entitled to take credit for their refusal to capitulate to Hitler, and for their willingness to fight him at all risk, but it is time their compatriots realized that even the gentleman has had his day.